GOD HAS MANY NAMES:

IV. LIBERATOR OF THE CAPTIVES

December 9, 1990

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11
Luke 1:46-55

"The spirit of the Lord God is upon me...to proclaim liberty to the captives,..." --Isaiah 61:1 (NRSV)

God has many names. And it is a matter of some importance when you are talking publicly about God, or thinking privately about God, or praying to God, that in order for the names you use for God to have integrity they must be, in some way, related to your experience of God; and in order to have some authority they must, in some way, be related to what the Bible says about God.

What you call anything has a way of influencing you - your perceptions and your behavior. If you tell your child that he is stupid: if the only thing your child hears you say is that she is not coordinated, not smart, not adequate: she will begin to become what you have named her. Furthermore, your own relationship with her will be shaped and confined tragically by the names you call her. And you will miss her brightness, her moments of growth, her tentative but brave attempts to try something new. You will miss who she is.

Now, when you translate that to religion, when you call your God by any name, you automatically limit God. You automatically start to miss the mystery and complexity to which the word God points.

If the only name you have for God is Almighty Lord, you may miss that part of God's mystery that is not Almighty or Lordly at all, that precious part of God that is vulnerable and compassionate, that compelling portrait of God as a grieving parent forced one afternoon to witness the death of a beloved son.

If the only thing you ever call God is Father, you miss that dimension of God that groans in labor at the birth of creation, the God who lovingly nurses an infant, the God who tenderly comforts the broken-hearted by holding them to her bosom.

Every naming of God limits God. Every name of God, if it is the only name you can use, becomes an idol, a verbal idol as opposed to a wooden or stone idol. And it is for that reason that the Bible is very cautious about the name of God.

When Moses is tending his sheep in the wilderness of Midian and he hears a voice speaking to him out of a burning bush, and the voice tells him to go down into Egypt and lead the Hebrew slaves to freedom, Moses says "What is your name? When they ask me who sent me, what shall I tell them?" And the answer Moses gets, the Bible says, is not a name at all, but a verb, a list of Hebrew consonants that sounds like Yahweh: the translation is "I am who I am" or "I will be who I will be." Tell them "I am has sent me to you."

Some people who have thought about it have concluded that it is the genius of Biblical religion, i.e. this avoidance of a proper name for God and instead calling God a verb which needs to be completed. "I am..." I am your creator. I will be your provider. I will be a father to you. I will be a mother to you. I am the one who will be there when you need me, when you have nowhere else to turn, when you have no power, no ability to help yourself. I am the one who hears the cries of my captive people; I am the one who leads them out of captivity into freedom.

I am the Liberator of the Captives.

And young Mary, a frightened teenager, sensing within her own body God's liberation of the world, says to her cousin Elizabeth and all of human history...

"My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God
my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on
the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations
will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done
great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in
the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful
from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good
things, and sent the rich away
empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he

made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his
descendants forever."
[Luke 1:46-56]

I was reading an essay William Willimon wrote recently on the "hard" Gospel. Willimon has a penetrating sense of humor and he was musing over the fact that a character by the name of John the Baptist often shows up in the Advent scripture readings as a forerunner of Jesus... "Imagine," Willimon says, "putting John the Baptist on a Christmas Card and saying:

"Our thoughts for you at this special time of year are best expressed by the one who said 'You brood of vipers! Who told you to flee from the wrath to come.' Merry Christmas." [In Trust, "Preaching of the Hard Gospel," p. 19-20]

Well, that prompted my own musing for a whole new line of Scripture Christmas cards featuring Mary, as always, a lovely gentle teenager, brunette, perhaps framed in a window looking out onto rolling hills with a bright star shining in the evening sky. The inscription, borrowing from Willimon would be:

"Our holiday wishes for you were
expressed by one who said":
'He has scattered the proud...
He has brought down the powerful
and lifted up the lowly.
He has filled the hungry with
good things.
And sent the rich away empty'

Merry Christmas"

It is a hard word, a strenuous, challenging word. If, as someone has suggested, the job of the preacher is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable, Mary's song is a Biblical word that afflicts us all, preacher and people alike. But it is also a word about God, and what it says about God is a very good word.

Luke begins the story of Jesus with the women talking. A frightened teenager, recently engaged to a carpenter from Nazareth, who finding herself suddenly pregnant, travels to visit her elderly cousin Elizabeth - who is also pregnant. (Her baby will be John the Baptist.) The women talk...

And what Luke has Mary saying on the occasion we know as The Magnificat, from the Latin for the first words, "My soul magnifies the Lord."

What Mary says is startling. God is praised for power and goodness. But then the focus changes. Social and political and economic realities are introduced to the scene which until now is "made for Hallmark." Suddenly the high are brought low: the lowly are lifted up; the hungry are fed and the rich are sent away empty. And, worse yet, the one

responsible for all this social upheaval is none other than the Holy One, God. "I am." I am the one who hears the cries of the captives and the oppressed. I am the one who sets them free.

Uncomfortable as it makes us, it is one of the major ideas in the Bible. When people are down and out, God shows up. When people are sick and poor and lonely, when people are in captivity to forces, principalities and powers, St. Paul called them, over which they have no control, when people are victimized by other people, you can count on the great "I am" to hear their cries and to come to them and start the work of releasing them from their captivity.

When the whole ruling class of Israel had been carried off into Babylonian exile, one of the prophets writes to them:

> "The Lord has anointed me, he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captive and release to the prisoners."

It has been called God's preference for the outsiders, the powerless, the poor, and that always jars those of us who are not poor, who have power and influence and are insiders. It's not that God doesn't like rich people: not at all. That easy ideology misses the point. It's just that rich and powerful people sometimes convince themselves that they're already free and so don't need much from God. It's just that the rich and powerful sometimes think they already have everything they need - and what they expect from God and religion is a little undergirding of the status quo, which after all, is comfortable. The poor, the ones oppressed by forces beyond their control, however, know they are not free; know they don't have what they need, know they are dependent on God. Their religion is heavy on freedom.

When poor people hear The Magnificat, they know who the characters are. Henri Nouwen writes in Gracias, his South American journal, that Mary is the heroine of poor people in the Third World because she knows what oppression is. When some nameless, faceless bureaucrat tells her she has to ride a donkey for miles in order to be counted, during the ninth month of her pregnancy instead of staying close to her home, she knows what powerlessness is. When she can't even find a room in which to have her baby, she knows what homelessness is. When the government starts killing all the infant babies in her village, she knows about military brutality. And so when she sings her song of liberation, poor people sit up and listen, and on occasion, when they listen, those who are in power decide that Mary's Magnificat may be too suggestive, too dangerous, and ask the churches to read it in Latin, please.

"I am the one who liberates the captives." It is one of the powerful stories in our own history. Our Calvinist predecessors provided a theology for the American Revolution based on God's commitment to the liberty of the individual. And one of the great miracles of grace in our own American story is that the slaves - who had every reason to detest Christianity as part of the system that justified their oppression - did not do so. Instead Black religion heard in the Gospel the word of freedom. And when the stories were read about Egyptian slavery and Moses going down to lead the

people to freedom, slave religion heard a Biblical motif that was not heard in the Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist and Episcopal churches of the slave owners. Black religion knew that God was not pleased with slavery. When they sang:

> "Go down Moses to Egypt land. Tell ole Pharaoh:
> Let my people go,"

they knew they were in Egypt and they knew who Pharaoh was and whose side God was on.

The argument has always been forwarded that Christianity is a spiritual religion, that religion and politics, religion and economics don't mix; that the Gospel of Christ has to do with the interiors of your soul and not the structures of society, with the afterlife, not the conditions of this life. It is very difficult to maintain that position and to be open to the Biblical witness. Not that people don't try.

An article in the December issue of Reader's Digest, "Look What They've Done to My Songs," complete with a picture of the new Presbyterian Hymnal and a lament that it doesn't contain the author's favorite songs, (an extraordinary egotism, defining a denomination's Hymnal as a private religious hit parade!) attacks mainline churches for a variety of incidents which the author has intentionally misinterpreted and in some cases simply misstated. But his real problem is that he believes church leaders "emphasize a theology that downplays the spiritual," substituting "social, economic and political action for the real business of religion - worship, study of Scriptures, a spiritual vision of life and death, and a code of moral conduct." Who says that's the purpose of religion? Not the Bible I read. Not Jesus' mother.

She apparently believed that the birth of her son had something to do with hungry people being fed. The prophet Isaiah apparently believed God is in the business of binding up the broken-hearted, who are heart-broken because they are being oppressed and have no hope, and proclaiming release to the captives. The oldest heresy in history which the Reader's Digest rushes to embrace is that Christianity is "spiritual" - meaning separate from the real world of people and politics and economics and social reality. If you are nervous about Christian social activism, and if you think real religion is not concerned about justice and peace and equality and freedom - you're going to have to deal with Jesus' mother.

Mary thought the birth of her son would make a difference. Mary thought that in him, the Mighty One of Israel, the great "I am" was doing something in the world to side with the hungry and poor and oppressed. And so her word comes to us as God's word in this Advent season as challenge and demand.

She won't allow us to come to Bethlehem with our eyes shielded from the realities of the world. She won't allow us to see her child without seeing the children. Our infant mortality rate is seventeenth in the world. There is a long list of countries you and I would not choose to live in, where an infant is safer and more secure and more likely to survive than in the United States of America. Seventeenth!

In terms of all available data, we have a disaster on our hands, a generation of neglected children. In six categories, "child abuse, poverty, teen suicide, drug abuse, school drop-outs, and infant mortality - 1987 was the worst period for children in two decades." [See America, March 24, 1990, p. 293, cited by Walter Brueggemann, Interpretation, October 1990, p. 400]

I don't like knowing about that any more than you do. I don't like the fact that in this prosperous nation there are many people who have no room, no home, no place to be except the city streets.

I don't like the reminders in this season of extravagance and generosity. But I like even less someone suggesting, in the name of the Gospel, that the real purpose of religion is not hungry babies and homeless adults but something called a "spiritual vision for life." Tell it to Mary.

I would submit that the opposite is the truth. Christianity is not the five-year-plan for redistributing the wealth, but it most certainly is a good and strong word about a God whose priority is people - people in relationship, people in society: a God who cares about nations and societies and individuals learning to live in a way that affirms and protects and enhances the precious life of each newborn infant.

I would submit that faithful followers of Jesus Christ cannot avoid, even if they'd like to, the political and economic implications of their theology. I would submit as an example of faithfulness a church willing to raise the hope of peaceful alternatives in the midst of the rising rhetoric of war, a church which can be counted on to stand with those no one else will stand with - the children, the poor, the powerless, the meek. That's not meddling. That's what being faithful to God is about.

There is a strong and sometimes disturbing word here, but it is also a very good word. Because what Mary is telling us is that God's name is "I am," the one who hears the captives' cry. "I am" the one who cares about you where you - exactly where you are.

Because Mary forces the issue of life, real life, into the Christmas story... because Mary makes us pay attention to the real world, her word is redemptive for us, because it is ultimately about a God who will be with us whenever and wherever we are in captivity, whoever we are.

> "I am the one who will come at just those places in your life where you are in some kind of prison...
>
> Perhaps it is the captivity of illness, lingering, debilitating, frightening... I will be there.
>
> Perhaps it is the captivity of consumerism and success, and the perpetual pursuit of more money to buy more goods to provide happiness - which is always one raise away. I will be there to show you the way to freedom.

Perhaps it is the captivity of unrealistic expectation your parents, your own - which you never seem to be able to meet and which are as heavy as a chain around your neck. I will be there.

Perhaps it is the captivity of guilt and shame which you cannot shake. You can't believe what you've done. You can't believe anyone could ever understand or forgive. Or the captivity of addiction, or codependence, or a relationship that feels like a prison and is. Or perhaps it is boredom or emptiness. I am the one who will come to show you the way to freedom.

Or perhaps your captivity may be described in the language of Isaiah... the captivity of the broken-hearted: because someone you loved has died, and the darkness of grief has descended; or perhaps your captivity this morning is uncertainty and the sense that you may not have a job in two months; or perhaps your particular captivity is the fear of the future, fear of aging, fear of your own mortality or perhaps your captivity is that there does not seem to be reason for confidence in life or yourself or because you cannot imagine a day when you will rejoice and be glad again, when you will sing and dance and laugh

Please know that there is one who cares, and more than that one who has promised to be your support, your advocate; one who has begun a work for your freedom from whatever is hemming you in and weighing you down.

The strong and good word of Mary is that our God, The great I AM one who always

-looks with favor on the lonely...,
one who always has mercy on the frightened...

Our God lifts up the lowly and fills
the hungry with good things...

God has many names. Liberator of the Captives is one of them. Thanks be to God.

Amen.